



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release March 2, 1987

David Klinger 202-343-5634

UNITED STATES TO JOIN INTERNATIONAL WETLANDS CONVENTION IN APRIL

American wetlands of importance to wildlife and people alike will get an added measure of protection in April as the United States joins the 40-nation "Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat."

The treaty, popularly known as the "Ramsar Convention" after Ramsar, Iran, where it was negotiated in 1971, sets wetlands conservation as an international goal and encourages member countries to designate significant wetlands within their borders for a worldwide list of areas valued for their biological and other scientific features.

President Reagan signed the instruments of ratification for the wetlands convention on November 10, 1986, following approval by the U.S. Senate last October. The United States will join the Ramsar Convention officially on April 18, 1987.

"The value of the Ramsar Convention lies not in what it requires of member countries, but what it signifies about a nation's commitment to wetlands protection," said Frank Dunkle, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Our joining this treaty and designating certain areas as wetlands of world importance says that we vow to the other member nations that such unique places will be preserved by the United States. Of course, we hope this international effort will help all nations to understand that wetlands conservation is a pressing worldwide need."

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Dunkle will chair the June 4 meeting of the conference of the parties to the wetlands convention in Regina, Saskatchewan, where wetlands conservation accomplishments in the United States, Canada, and Mexico will be highlighted.

Already, nearly 49 million acres of wetlands in 344 units throughout the world have been designated as internationally important, ranging from Canada's summer nesting habitat for the endangered whooping crane in Wood Buffalo National Park to conservation areas for the sea elephant in the Australian state of Tasmania.

Four U.S. wetlands--all U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) or State-managed areas--have been designated under the Ramsar agreement: Ash Meadows NWR in Nevada, the "Brigantine" and "Barnegat" units of the Edwin B. Forsythe NWR in New Jersey, Izembek NWR and State Game Range in Alaska, and Okefenokee NWR in Georgia and Florida.

Ash Meadows, a recently-established 23,000-acre desert refuge, serves as an oasis for many waterfowl and endangered species. The Forsythe units are strategically located along the Atlantic Flyway, a major migratory path for ducks, geese, birds-of-prey, and songbirds, and they also support unique public use and research programs within the urbanized mid-Atlantic region. Izembek, a vast 416,000-acre maritime wetland, also is valued by waterfowl as a major Alaskan summering ground and contains the largest eelgrass beds in North America. The famed Okefenokee Swamp is one of the Nation's most outstanding wetlands, supporting diverse types of wetlands-dependent species from the American alligator to colonial wading birds.

The Ramsar treaty's objective is to "stem the progressive encroachment on and loss of wetlands now and in the future." Although the treaty's effectiveness depends upon voluntary compliance by member nations in meeting that objective, each country is obliged to designate at least one wetland of international significance and to promote an active wetlands conservation program. Membership in Ramsar does allow for the sharing of technical and scientific information about wetlands by countries, and joint participation by the U.S. and several Latin American countries that have already joined Ramsar is considered beneficial to the welfare of many waterfowl species that migrate within the Western Hemisphere.

Wetlands are the most biologically-productive places on Earth, serving as important nesting and foraging grounds for birds, small mammals, and other species; spawning areas for many commercially-important fish and shellfish; and habitat for unique vegetation and exotic plants. They also serve many other purposes in nature: as storage areas for floodwater; buffers to storms, wave erosion, and sedimentation; and filters for pollution and other types of contamination in the environment.

The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that the United States loses more than 400,000 acres of wetlands every year, chiefly to agriculture, urbanization, and other development.